



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

287 West Street

Rocky Hill, Connecticut 06067

Dr. Linda S. Schwartz, RN, MSN, DrPH, FAAN
Commissioner

TESTIMONY OF COMMISSIONER LINDA S. SCHWARTZ, RN, MSN, DrPH, FAAN

Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs
Presented to the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs
March 2, 2010

Chairman Maynard, Chairman Graziani and distinguished members of the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am Dr. Linda S. Schwartz, Commissioner of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (CT DVA), and I am pleased to offer testimony this morning on two bills before your committee.

RB 314: AN ACT CONCERNING MILITARY OR VETERAN STATUS ON STATE-ISSUED FORMS AND PUBLICATIONS

I fully support the intent contained in RB 314. Screening for veterans is a critical step in the process to connect them to benefits. Asking individuals if they have ever served in the U.S. Armed Forces is especially important for individuals seeking health care treatment, those involved with the legal system and those seeking social services assistance.

However, I am concerned about the scope and design of this legislation and the likely administrative hurdles and costs state agencies will face in implementing its intent. Under this legislation, all state agencies will include a military service/veteran screening question in future forms distributed to the public and be required to forward names and addresses to the DVA for entry into our Veterans Registry database.

Our experience shows that if an administrative requirement is too burdensome, it will not produce the desired results. Section 27-100c of the general statutes already calls for municipal tax assessors to forward to our agency the names and addresses of all veterans registered on their tax rolls. Unfortunately, this is an unfunded mandate and there is no standard software program used by all tax assessors to capture and organize this data in a format that clearly identifies only veterans and not their survivors. We are left with data that cannot be easily manipulated and that requires an inordinate amount of staff time to utilize.

The CT DVA already makes proactive contact with the large majority of veterans coming off active duty. We receive copies of all discharge certificates for veterans who claim Connecticut as their home and send out personalized packets containing benefits and contact information. Additionally, our Veterans Registry continues to grow through the popularity of the Veterans Wartime Service Medal Program. We currently have nearly 24,000 entries in the Veterans Registry.

Although additional names and addresses of Connecticut veterans would always be welcomed, I am more concerned with other state agencies and service providers being able to identify veterans in their daily work. It is more important that a state trooper, emergency room technician or state social worker be able to immediately identify a veteran who may be in need. Enabling front-line state workers to immediately identify a client in need as a veteran and to facilitate a connection with our agency is what we are trying to achieve.

To that end, I would propose an alternative identification program currently in use in several other states that would allow current members of the Armed Forces and veterans to receive a distinguishable mark or symbol on their driver's license. Just like we currently do for organ donors, this symbol – such as a “V” for veteran or a U.S. Flag – would immediately identify someone as a veteran to all who examine their driver's license. Such a symbol would be a valuable identification tool for law enforcement officers, medical personnel and social service outreach workers.

I recommend that in this time of limited state resources, that we look towards piloting a similar driver's license veterans identification program rather than producing mounds of forms and data entry that may or may not benefit Connecticut's veterans.

RB 5388: AN ACT CONCERNING HOMELESS FEMALE VETERANS

RB 5388 recognizes the special needs and concerns of female homeless veterans – as does the Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs.

For many years, state statute has required that we have an accredited female veteran benefits counselor on our Advocacy and Assistance outreach staff. Additionally at the State Veterans' Home in Rocky Hill, we maintain a dedicated wing for homeless female veterans with 22 available beds. We currently have six female veterans staying with us. However, due to the



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nature of the veteran population and facilities at Rocky Hill, we are unable to accommodate veterans – men or women – with dependent children.

Currently across the state, there are approximately 300 supportive housing units in operation or development that are targeted to veterans, with the large majority being open to both males and females. National data does indicate that homeless women veterans are the most rapidly expanding population with the most unmet needs. My support and advocacy for women veterans and veterans who are homeless is well known throughout the nation. The Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs welcomes the opportunity to assess the population of women veterans in our state who are in need of housing assistance. However, I would caution that estimating the number of homeless veterans in Connecticut is not an exact science. The seasonal and transient nature of homelessness in our state complicates the process. We do know that approximately 131,000 veterans are homeless on the streets of America on most nights and that 4% to 6% of these veterans are women.

Clearly, the most significant need nationwide and in Connecticut is for supportive housing for female veterans with children. Due to the generosity of a woman veteran donor, we have been able to offer limited financial support to women with children who contact the Department.

On a national level, the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs has recognized the need for more transitional and supportive housing programs for homeless female veterans and is making available more grants beginning this year.

Our Federal VA partners do offer specialized services for female veterans in Connecticut. The VA Connecticut Health Care System operates a dedicated Women's Health Care Center in West Haven and a Women's Health Clinic in New Haven. The VA's Vet Centers which provide confidential, one-on-one and group counseling also employ female counselors who are specialists in treating victims of sexual trauma. And the West Haven VA's Errera Community Care Center offers a variety of support programs to both male and female veterans in need.

There are substantial resources available to women veterans in Connecticut and we would be pleased to outline those resources in a report to the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs as required by this legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on these pieces of legislation. I would be pleased to address any questions that you may have.

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